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ABSTRACT

Since recorded usage of vertical files in a university library does not always indicate actual needs of patrons, a study was conducted on the use of a collection of 20,000 pamphlets over a three-year period (1972-75). Data were collected from circulation records and from a questionnaire circulated with each pamphlet. Three subject areas had the highest circulation figures: drug abuse, veneral disease, and cruelty to children. A positive response was received concerning the retention of the vertical file. (DS)

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VERTICAL FILE USAGE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

By Dorothy P. Wells

A study of vertical file usage in a university library covering the last three fiscal years (1972-75) impressed the researcher with certain uniform characteristics. Naturally, this overview created a sense of expectancy, or a fixed potential, from this resource. In this short three-year span of study, however, the value of retaining unused subjects is obscured.

For purposes of identification, the vertical file under study contains an estimated collection of 20,000 pamphlets of a transitory nature. It is housed in fourteen, four-drawer, legal-sized cabinets. Pendaflex folders bridged together with Pendaflex links make of it a self-indexing source. Pamphlets are identified by serial number which circumstance greatly facilitated the studies.

Recorded usage only was considered since there is no means of determining the usage that terminated within the reference room itself. However, as users are permitted to check out as many as ten pamphlets from any one subject for a period of one week (with one renewal possible), it is felt that most usage was recorded.

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The fiscal years studied were: 1972-73, 1973-74, and 1974-75. During these three years, the on-campus fall enrollment declined respectively: 17,788; 17,215; and 16,246. Commensurately, the number of users declined: 702; 671; and 648. Percentage of users remained about constant--4%.

Since the cataloging department of a large university library would understandably reject the placing of index cards to the vertical file in the public catalog, there is no conventional way of directing the uninitiated to it. Knowledge that a vertical file exists passes by word of mouth and by reference librarians bringing it to the user's attention. Functioning under this circumstance, one would plausibly expect little fluctuation in the percentage of users to the vertical file.

As a result of perpetual revision of the vertical file, the number of subjects available for use ran rather constant during the three years: 1458 - 1488 - 1480, a total variance of thirty. Likewise, the number of subjects charged during each year remained firm: 523 - 534 - 521, or something over one-third of capability.

Seventeen different subjects were charged the first year by one user, 16 the second year by another, and 21 the third year by still another. These three users evidently were highly receptive to the succinct format of pamphlet material and relied upon it heavily for their research. No doubt, the vertical file collection proved comprehensive enough for their particular needs. The rest of the users charged a number of subjects ranging anywhere from one subject to these extremes. The actual reasons for this disposition of usage remains elusive.

Not elusive, however, are the interests of the users. The signs of our times are plainly written in these subjects, carrying a circulation of 50 or more during any one, or all, of the three years studied. Any circulation under 50 is not recorded.

	1972-73	1973-74	1974-75
Abortion	220	230	135
Aged - Medical Care	57		
Alcohol & Alcoholism	70	139	182
Birth Control	126	86	52
Cancer	50		
Cruelty to Children	70	150	213
Diabetes	61		52
Drug Abuse	435	138	192
Euthanasia	85	92	81
Heart - Diseases	63		73
Homosexuality	50	101	71
Juvenile Delinquency		55	71
Marriage			51
Negroes	109		
Nutrition	79	67	93
Pollution (Water & Air)	116	134	99
Population	66		
Prisons - Indiana			109
Prisons - U. S.	56		
Sex Instruction		58	69
Unmarried Mothers	107		
Venereal Diseases	62		104
Woman - Rights of Women		112	114

The circulation of drug abuse, leading all other subjects any one year during the three-year period, crested in 1972-73. The emergency of the evil and the availability of pamphlet material were then at their peak. Our vertical file housed over 400 different pamphlets on this subject. Interest waned the second year only to pick up again the third.

Venereal diseases, to which Congress turned its attention in 1972 with an allocation of $225 million to be implemented over the three-year

fiscal period 1973-75 for research on and prevention and control of, held high interest. Over 100 pamphlets were available for use.

Cruelty to children has come to the fore, not only in pamphlet and newspaper article publications, but in the proliferation of books, magazine articles, government publications and dissertations. It is a serious social ill demanding correction, and it is gratifying to find our youth involved in research to the extent indicated this past year.

Certain subjects, such as euthanasia, juvenile delinquency, nutrition, and alcoholism carry a perennial interest. In fact, information about psychological and physiological problems of all kinds are sought out in pamphlet format. If education is the answer to these ills, surely the vertical file can play a significant role in disseminating information that is current, concise, and authoritative.

National concerns in the area of power resources, pollution, population, abortion, and the rights of women, draw the user to tap the resources of the vertical file. Likewise, do practical personal concerns, such as job interviews and applications for positions. A rather offbeat question concerning shoe sizes brought an appreciation of the collection when the subject folder entitled Shoes divulged this information.

Particularly useful and frequently offering the only information available of its kind is pamphlet material on the states and on the countries of the world.

During the three-year period studied, the total circulation figures ran respectively: 5,016; 4,709; and 5,019.

Wishing to solicit personal opinions of users concerning the value of the vertical file, the writer devised a questionnaire to be slipped into each envelope of material charged. Questions asked were: What subjects did you find helpful; what subjects lacking; and would you recommend that the VF be continued. General response of a positive nature were to this effect:

> Playgrounds--this was the only material in the playground file, but I found it extremely helpful and told me almost exactly what I was looking for. Definitely keep the vertical file.
>
> This is the first time I've used the vertical file for material. I do think it is helpful.
>
> I have not used the file enough to know what is lacking but the subject I needed was there and very much a help.
>
> Have yet to find any subject not represented--have used several different subjects and all have served the purpose. Positively, keep the file.
>
> I found no particular subjects lacking. I just use the files as necessary, but it has been a tremendous help to me. It is an absolute necessity to continue and expand the file.

Particular subjects mentioned as being helpful were: Homosexuality, adolescents, employment of women, cats, migrant labor, sex instruction, sudden death, physical fitness, quackery, child abuse, physiological effects of tobacco, heart diseases, creativity, posture, Ku Klux Klan, finance charges, alcoholism, pollution, diseases, and others.

In examining the responses from a negative point of view, considerable insight was derived as to what users expect of the vertical file. In some instances their expectations were unrealistic and unrelated to its purpose. One user expected to find information on available jobs.

Another felt more information should be in the collection on the University and its programs. A user who complained of no material on Birth Defects had failed to note the See reference to Deformities. The Indiana Consumer Credit Code is located in Burns Indiana Statutes. However, a user attempted to find it in the VF and was chagrined that he could not find it there.

Some suggestions were acted upon--those requesting more information on death, trees of Indiana, lead poisoning, sickle cell anemia, and others. Information in pamphlet form on the Gay Liberation Movement, divorce, and prostitution are not readily available.

Meeting the needs of users is not initiated from a study of usage but in being alert to the daily demands and sensing the current concerns of society. A study does indicate to what extent the material acquired has been used and how many take advantage of it.

Statistics and personal comments of users would seem to indicate that with an adequate budget and sufficient time to sleuth for free and inexpensive materials, the vertical file can be a vital supplemental adjunct to cataloged and other library materials. But without good organization and procedures, without perpetual revision and fresh supplies of pamphlets of a vital nature flowing in, the VF can be a disappointing experience and unworthy of maintenance.

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